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## Table of contents

1. Chamber honors business innovators.....	1
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## Chamber honors business innovators

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**Abstract:** [...] the competition was very keen, said Jim Schlies, the chamber's vice president of economic development.

**Full text:** APPLETON -- Entrepreneurial spirit, community service and innovative technology made three companies and one female executive stand out in the Fox Cities this year.

All were honored Wednesday night for their business acumen and achievements in front of a crowd of 750 business and community leaders at the Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce & Industry's annual meeting at the Radisson Paper Valley Hotel.

The event featured the local awards and a speech by Laura Ingraham, a nationally known conservative political commentator and radio talk show host.

The chamber presented small, medium and large Manufacturer of the Year Awards respectively to C3 Corp., Surface Mount Technology Corp. and J.J. Keller & Associates. It gave its Athena Award to Sharon Hulce, president and chief executive officer of Employment Resource Group.

"We had a very large field of applications this year and a lot of quality applications. Because of that, the competition was very keen," said Jim Schlies, the chamber's vice president of economic development.

"It's a wonderful way to let our team now that everything we've done in the last year has been worthwhile," said C3 president Bruce Backer. He accepted the award with partners Joe Van De Hey, founder, and Marv Wall, vice president. The Appleton company, with 30 employees, engineers and builds custom machines using robotics, automation and specialized software. They recently built a plant in Appleton's Northeast Industrial Park.

The larger firms also valued the local tribute as an affirmation of their work.

"We're blessed and humbled," said Bob Keller, president and chief executive officer of J.J. Keller & Associates.

"We're accepting it on behalf of all of our 1,000 employees."

He came to the podium with his brother, Jim, chief operating officer and acknowledged his father, founder John J. Keller, in the audience.

"Most of our business is done outside of the Valley, so this means a lot that our employees and company are recognized by the chamber," said Christopher Sumnicht, president and chief executive officer of Surface Mount Technology Corp., Grand Chute. SMT offers electronic design and manufacturing services to customers overlooked by large technology players in its sector.

The chamber awarded Hulce with the Athena Award, a recognition given to a business woman who has contributed to her company, industry, the community and the chamber.

Hulce acknowledged that it is sometimes harder for women to reach the same levels of success as men.

"Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did," she said, recalling a favorite Hollywood quote. "Only she did it backwards and in high heels."

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